



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search
<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>
aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

Path for Rural Autonomous Production after Reform and Opening-up

ZHANG Jian *

School of Politics and Management, Xianyang Normal University, Xianyang 712000, China

Abstract This paper firstly introduces research achievements in change of rural society in China after reform and opening-up. Researches are conducted mainly in household contract responsibility system and the relation between township government and village administration. From the perspective of autonomy, it reviews the course of autonomous growth in rural economic field from the economic system reform to implementation of household contract responsibility system. Then, it analyzes expansion of space of rural self-organizations and reconstruction of relation between township government and village administration. Finally, it is concluded that autonomy is a path for development of rural society.

Key words Autonomy, Democratization, Path for change

Based on petty farmer economy, traditional rural communities in China are autonomous social communities far from state power system. After new China was founded, an "overall society" system is cultivated. In this society, the state power penetrates to all fields of rural community life and successfully organizes farmers to administrative network of People's Commune, and a mode of rural community integration forms through administrative. Since the reform and opening up, rural reform in China starts from change of economic system and ways of economic growth and rapidly goes deep into political, cultural and social fields. These completely change social structure of rural areas and bring the countryside into benefit division and integration. Academic circle has made remarkable achievement in research of social change in rural areas of China after the reform and opening up. Researches are mainly conducted in two fields. One is about the household contract responsibility system. From the perspective of system and institutional change theories, many scholars believe that the household contract responsibility system has established effective incentive and restrictive mechanisms, which have promoted rural economic development. The other is about township government and village administration. Scholars think that the township government supported by coercive force of state is administrative and centralized, also the origin of grass-roots political authority; while the village administration supported by villagers' willingness features self-administration and democracy, and villagers handle grass-roots social affairs by themselves^[1]. The structure of township government and village administration is formed to solve out-of-sequence of rural areas due to shortage and lagging of rural political system after household contract responsibility system. It is the reconstruction of rural political sys-

tem for suiting change of economic system. From the process of rural economic and political reforms, it is shown that autonomy is a central concept of rural social change in over three decades. The trend of autonomous reform path satisfies benefit pursuit of every party in rural areas, regulates farmers' value orientation, changes farmers' life style, injects great vitality into development and production of rural society, and promotes rural production and reproduction. Here, it is expected to seek a unique path for social change in China's rural areas from the perspective of autonomy.

1 Autonomous growth in rural economic field

At initial stage of reform, the state launched the economic system reform to restore and develop economy seriously destroyed in the Culture Revolution. The motivation of economic system reform is decentralization of authority, and value orientation is economic democracy. In the end of 1978, at the closing conference of preliminary meeting of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Central Committee, Deng Xiaoping stressed and analyzed economic democracy. "Now, our economic management system is too centralized in authority, so it is required to decentralize authority. Otherwise, it will not be favorable to bringing into full play enthusiasm of the state, local, enterprise and laborer, and not favorable to achieving modern economic management and improving labor productivity. Local, enterprise and production team should have more autonomous power in operating management"^[2]. The Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Central Committee clearly stated that "ownership and autonomy of People's Commune and production team should be protected by national laws. All levels of organizations of the People's Commune should insist on democratic management, cadre election and open accounting". On September 28 of 1979, in *Decisions on Several Issues Concerning Speeding up Agricultural Development*, the Party Central Committee further emphasizes that

Received: October 9, 2011 Accepted: January 4, 2012

Supported by Special Scientific Research Foundation of Xianyang Normal University (08XSYK303).

* Corresponding author. E-mail: zhangjian1969617@163.com

"ownership and autonomy of People's Commune and production team should be protected by national laws, and no organization or individual should deprive or infringe upon their benefits" [3]. At the meeting of secretaries of provinces, cities and autonomous regions held from September 14 to 22 in 1980, the minutes of the meeting pointed out that "any policy and any work implemented by the Party in rural areas must consider farmers' economic benefits and respect farmers' democratic rights" [3]. Nevertheless, under the guiding ideology of decentralization, the development of fixed output to households fails to go smoothly. Documents of Central Committee stress that it is not allowed to implement the system of fixed output to households. For instance, *Issues about Strengthening and Improving Agricultural Production Responsibility System* in September 1980 indicated that some regions (such as remote and poor and backward regions) can implement the system of fixed output to households or work contracted to the household, and the system should be stable in a long term [4]. Until January 1983, *Several Issues Concerning Current Rural Economic Policies* issued by Central Committee of the Communist Party of China gave high opinion of nature and status of fixed output to households and work contracted to the household. It pointed out that the household contract responsibility system adopts principle of integration of unified and separate management, so it can bring into full play advantages of collective and enthusiasm of individual. Further improvement and development of this system will certainly bring the socialist agricultural cooperative road more suitable for realities of China. From then on, the agricultural production responsibility system in the form of farmer households contracting land and other means of production from collective organization is rapidly spread in all rural areas of the whole country.

The implementation of contract responsibility system is in fact a non-collectivization course of rural areas. From the aspect of content, the collective provides land and other means of production for farmer households in the form of contract, while farmer households make independent decisions on management according to authority specified by the contract, and share operating achievements on the condition of completing both national and collective tasks. From the aspect of specific form, work contracted to households means that all products after contracting households paying agricultural tax and other reserves for common reserve fund and public welfare fund are in the possession of farmers; while fixed output to households means the output, investment and work point are fixed, the amount exceeding the fixed output will be in the possession of farmers and underproduction will be compensated. In other words, land management right is given to farmers, and farmers obtain power of independent disposition and get the rid of reliance on the collective.

Along with decline of monopoly position of traditional collective economy, farmers start to possess right of private property reconstruction. Constant expansion of farmers' private economic activity space promotes autonomous growth in rural economic field. What's more, the market economy brings more

free rights to farmers and they can earn money capital through free sideline production, non-agricultural production, as well as working in cities. Examples of autonomous growth in rural economic field in this period include "farmer entrepreneurs", "tide of migrant workers", etc.

2 Expansion of space of rural self-organization

Academic circle and government have basically reached a common understanding in origin of villager autonomy. Generally speaking, after rise of the household contract responsibility system, vacancy of rural public power, sharp division of rural society and expansion of farmers' public living fields become the root of villager autonomy. From the logic of historical development, the implementation of household contract responsibility system has completed disintegrated the system of People's Commune combined with economic and political organizations. Farmers do not rely on collective economic organization under the system of People's Commune any more, and they become economic subjects with independent management right. Besides, the household contract responsibility system expands farmers' autonomous activity space, cultivates farmers' free awareness of separating from collective management, and arouses their personal behavior of not being restricted any more. Besides, due to lack of correct guidance, nearly total rural collective economy loses, collective property is looted and public facilities fall into disuse. As a result, the original production team of People's Commune in natural villages is increasingly paralyzed and fails to change its role in the transition of economic system and is incapable of assuming rural public functions in the new period. Then, vacuum appears in rural political power and provision of rural public goods because of collapse of old system and vacancy of new system. In other words, the right of dominance of administrative power over farmers' economic activities falls rapidly, leading to loss of administrative power in rural areas. Administrative villages and farmers become units free from control of administrative power. Consequently, rural society falls into disorder and chaos. In December 1981, the central rural work conference has realized such situation. "Recently, for various reasons, some grass-roots organizations in rural areas are slack, even fall into collapse, leading to many affairs out of control and bad things springing up rapidly" [5]. This indicates that the existing village administration system fails to respond to economic democracy, and it is required to find a new administration mechanism to strengthen organization of rural society. In fact, from the beginning, the household contract responsibility system is not only an important reform in rural economic field, but also has a huge impact on rural political and social fields. The most outstanding one is that along with loss of economic function of agricultural production with the aid of mandatory planning economy, the People's Commune loses its authoritative base and fails to incorporate new social force.

Township government and village administration make effort to mark the boundary between state power, social power,

rural grass-roots government and self-governance, to provide certain social and political space for self-organization and management of rural society, and provide system and organization framework for farmers' economic and political democracy. In practice, township government and village administration attach more emphasis on administrative functions of organization. Originally, the state stresses township government construction. The Notice of Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Strengthening Construction of Rural Grass-roots Government issued in September 1986 states that "grass-roots government is the basic organization of people's democratic dictatorship and series of works need grass-roots government", and it is required to "turn grass-roots government into a dynamic, authoritative and efficient government capable of leading and managing political, economic and cultural affairs in the administrative region" [6]. Nevertheless, there is little concern about villager autonomy. Among all 93 documents in *Major Documents of Agricultural and Rural Works in New Period* compiled by CCCPC Party Literature Research Office (from December 13, 1978 to March 20, 1992), only 8 documents mention villager autonomy or villager committee construction, and only one document (*Minutes of National Working Conference for Construction of Village Level Organizations* issued on August 10, 1990) states that it is required to carefully implement the *Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees of the People's Republic of China* (for Trial Implementation), strengthen grass-roots democratic and political construction, and combine the villager autonomy and grass-roots democratic and political construction. Even in this document, the focus is also still on how to restore and enhance administration, especially how to enhance the leadership of village Party Branch over villager committee [7]. After the promulgation of the *Organic Law of the Villagers' Committees of the People's Republic of China* in 1998, the villager autonomy still has to assist with township government in collecting agricultural taxes, controlling population, managing land compensation and obligatory military service, and even these administrative tasks become basis for evaluation of performance of village committee team. When autonomy organizations carry out or implement targets and tasks, it will naturally have administrative duties, and performing administrative duties will inevitably bring administrative functions.

Therefore, the rural grass-roots administration system after reform turns into "township government and village administration" from the People's Commune. Such administration pattern provides village with right to control property. Organizations at village level can dominate mountain forest, land, water resource and collective economy left in the period of collectivization and the People's Commune. Also, the Organic Law of the Villagers' Committee clearly states that villager committee is the grass-roots autonomy mass organization, and township government is responsible for guiding villager committee. However, the relation becomes somewhat tense between the guiding ideology of decentralization of state power and the target of controlling villages. What's worse, the administration of villager au-

tonomy directly promotes aggravates such tense relation. In over three decades of rural social development, the strength of administration of township government and village administration influences the rural administration all the time.

3 Reconstruction of relation between township government and village administration

In over 30 years of rural social development, rural economic and political development always takes on an increasing trend. Farmers are freer in economic activities, which relate to agriculture, industry and commerce. They have become a major force promoting national economic development. During democratization of politics, villager autonomy goes smoothly and develops rapidly in rural areas. The concept of villager autonomy gradually gets rooted in the hearts of people, and remarkable achievements have been made in democratic election of villager committee. In addition, level and scale of farmers' participating in and discussing government and political affairs steadily rise, and some migrant workers even become deputies to the National People's Congress. However, the construction of democratic nation is not complete, and there is still dilemma of "control" and "decentralization", which creates grave difficulty for rural society.

The establishment of household contract responsibility system makes duties and responsibilities more definite between farmers and the state. Farmers can act freely in production and allocation as long as they deliver required grain, pay stipulated agricultural tax and comply with state policies. In other words, farmers have independent space in economic activities and the government and other organizations should not interfere. At first, economic democracy is only limited to agricultural production. However, when the state completely opens the valve for free economic activities and constantly issues policies to encourage rural economic development, even pulls rural economic development in the form of indicators, township enterprises spring up rapidly and the tide of migrant workers is unexpected by the Party and government. Self-selection of economic activities creates imaginary space for farmers' totally free development. The original reliance on production team and People's Commune does not exist any more. Farmers will show antagonistic psychology and contempt for administrative orders. For example, they express resentment against family planning, grain purchasing, and agricultural taxation policies. There are even violent conflicts over these affairs.

At the same time, villager autonomy also develops rapidly in rural society at the action of administrative promotion. The original intention of central government implementing villager autonomy policy is to reinforce the legitimacy of grass-roots political power, stabilize rural society, refrain from corruption, and alleviate the relation between cadres and masses. In general, it is hoped that villager election can strengthen villager unity, social security and self-supply of public affairs of villages. However, election of villager committee also stimulates farmers' desire to decide village affairs. Excessive autonomy of villager com-

mittee causes that villagers and villager committee want to evade "legal" guidance of township government, or even refuse to pay agricultural taxes, and elude family planning policy. These not only hinder normal implementation of township administrative functions, but also seriously deviate from principle of villager autonomy, and leading to conflict between Party branch and villager committee.

In the situation of constant political games in rural society, the state power on one hand improves procedures and rules for election of villager committee, to achieve generalization, legislation and standardization of villager, and promote growth and development of farmers' self-organizations. On the other hand, for necessity of promoting modernization, the state must strengthen control over rural society, to obtain and maintain social order and resources that are favorable to modernization. In this situation, the state power has no intention to make the grass-roots administrative power secede from rural society. Consequently, conflict arises between grass-roots power, villager committee, between villager committee and Party Branch of the village, and between villager committee and individual farmer.

4 Conclusions: autonomy is a path for development of rural society

In the end of the 1970s, to speed up agricultural development, the state power implemented the system of fixed output to households and established agricultural policy and rural economic policy oriented towards bringing into full play enthusiasm of farmers. The agricultural production responsibility system carried out in rural areas, in particular the household contract responsibility system, drives adjustment of rural production relationship, then great change occurs in farmers' production, operation, allocation and even the working forms. Economic democracy not only summons up farmers' enthusiasm of production, working, and getting rich, but also promotes farmers' free awareness in the economic environment of "decentralization". As a result, the household contract responsibility system lays a solid foundation for reform and development of rural economy.

Increasingly free and open economic activities create greater opportunity for farmers to maximize their income. Farmers do not rely on rural organizations. They can be engaged in various activities not in violation of national laws to obtain resources and capitals for survival and development. Through democratic election of villager committee, grass-roots political power is placed on the basis of public opinion, and farmers have the right to elect village cadres. It is true that village election cannot solve problems in the village, but farmers will not abandon the democratic election right. If citizen society only seeks for maxi-

mization of self-power, sooner or later, it will lead to violent conflict between citizens and the state^[8]. Before popularization of villager autonomy, farmers confront with administrative power of village cadres and township government; after large-scale implementation of villager committee election, farmers and villager committee resist penetration and interference of township government separately in the form of "ballot" and "right to election". Along with new countryside development of rural taxation and expenses, gradual establishment of rural social security system and building harmonious society, and there will be original conflict of positive trend and dynamic interaction.

References

- [1] FAN Y. Evolution and characteristics of election of villagers committee[J]. China Rural Survey, 2001(1): 54–63. (in Chinese).
- [2] DENG XP. Selected works of Deng Xiaoping[M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1993: 145. (in Chinese).
- [3] Literature research department of Central committee of the CCP. A selection of important documents since the third plenary session [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1982: 172, 509. (in Chinese).
- [4] DU RS. Self-description by Du Runsheng: major policy decision of Chinese countryside system reform[M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2005: 126. (in Chinese).
- [5] China meeting summary of rural work[M]// Handbooks of township work in 21st century. Beijing: China Agriculture Press, 1999: 853. (in Chinese).
- [6] The State Council. Notice by central committee of the CCP and the state council on the strengthening of grassroots political power in country[EB/OL]. http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2005-02/06/content_2553527.htm/2010-10/11. (in Chinese).
- [7] SHEN YS. Expectation and criticism of villager autonomy[EB/OL]. <http://www.Chinaelections.org>. (in Chinese).
- [8] ZHU F. Villagers election and rural society change[C]// Fudan political comment vol. 4: right, responsibility and country. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006: 94. (in Chinese).
- [9] HAN GM, WEI J. Analysis on the rural cooperative organization established by returning migrant workers[J]. Asian Agricultural Research, 2011, 3(2): 149–151, 160.
- [10] LIU L, XIANG LB, ZHOU KL. Thought about the distribution system of peoples commune[J]. Journal of Anhui Agricultural Sciences, 2008, 36(1): 332–333, 352. (in Chinese).
- [11] REN AL. Independent innovation system of China's agriculture products processing industry[J]. Asian Agriculture Research, 2009, 1(7): 25–28, 36.
- [12] GUAN XX. Reflection and restructure of law making concepts of Chinese land expropriation act[J]. Journal of Anhui Agricultural Sciences, 2011, 39(9): 5537–5539. (in Chinese).
- [13] HE Z. An Exploratory analysis of cooperation model change in the process of tomato industrialization in Xinjiang, China[J]. Asian Agriculture Research, 2010, 2(2): 33–36.
- [14] YUE JH, LI S. Fishery right system in Japan[J]. Journal of Anhui Agricultural Sciences, 2009, 37(9): 4284–4286. (in Chinese).

(From page 4)

- [3] YANG GY, HAO XY. Theoretical thinking of agricultural scale management[J]. On Economic Problems, 2005(12): 42. (in Chinese).
- [4] GUO CZ. Developmental patterns and characteristics of agricultural

operation organizations in advanced countries[J]. World Agriculture, 2006(3): 7–9. (in Chinese).

- [5] LV QQ, ZHANG L, HAN X. Foreign agricultural cooperative[M]. Beijing: China Social Press, 2006. (in Chinese).